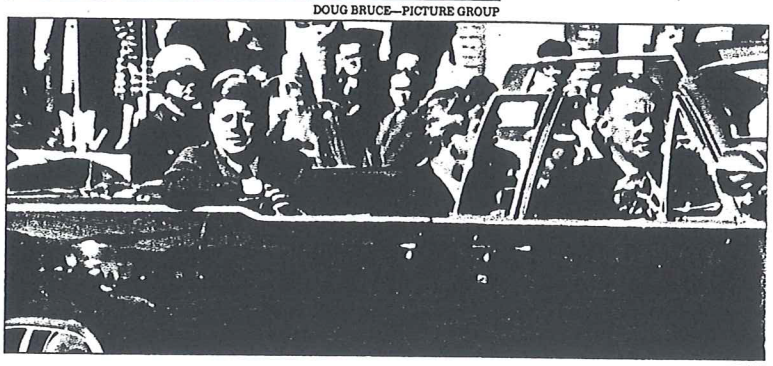
Did the Mob Kill JFK?

A Mafia lawyer says Hoffa issued the order

DOUG BRUCE—PICTURE GROUP



UPI

A mutual loathing: *The Teamsters boss (left), the presidential motorcade in Dallas*

Americans have been willing to buy countless theories about who really killed JFK—except, it seems, the one put out by the Warren Commission: that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Rumors of mob involvement in the president's death have proved particularly resilient. In 1978, the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) concluded that organized crime had the "motive, means and opportunity" for planning an assassination attempt. Now a mob lawyer has produced what he says is the smoking gun. In an interview with the New York Post last week, Frank Ragano said he personally delivered a message from Teamsters head Jimmy Hoffa to Mafia bosses Santos Trafficante and Carlos Marcello to "kill the president." He claims he thought it was a joke. But "they didn't laugh," said Ragano. "Their looks scared me."

Why did Ragano come clean now? Perhaps for the same reason other would-be explainers, from former presidential aides to anti-Castro exiles, have recently reemerged with their takes on the tragedy: "JFK," the Oliver Stone film that has raised conspiracy theory to a new art. "The whole environment around the movie" motivated Ragano to come forward and "confess his shame and guilt," says Jack Newfield, a biographer of Robert F. Kennedy and the author of the Post scoop. While Stone has enraged many viewers with his seamless fusion of assassination fact and fiction, he has certainly accomplished one of his goals: reigniting passionate curiosity about what really happened that awful day in Dallas. Last week congressmen including Ohio Rep. Louis Stokes, who chaired the HSCA investigation, called for the release of selectively declassified assassination files. With pressure mounting from such quarters as The New York Times editorial page, the House could pass a resolution reversing the order that placed the materials under seal until 2029.

At first glance, Ragano's confession—which he has offered to repeat under oath before Congress—seems to tie together a number of loose ends. The Kennedy administration had declared war on organized crime; RFK loathed Hoffa, who worked closely with the Mafia and, apparently, was killed by mobsters in 1975. As attorney general, RFK had Hoffa indicted on jury-tampering charges. He also had Marcello seized in New Orleans and deported to Guatemala—a little joke, since Marcello, born

Suspicious Memo to CIA Declassified!

Fellas:

Can't you get The New York Times best-seller list under control? This week's No. 1 paperback: Jim Garrison's "On the Trail of the Assassins," on which Oliver Stone's "JFK" is partly based. No. 11 paperback: Robert J. Groden and Harrison Edward Livingtone's "High Treason," which, like Stone, pins JFK's murder on "the War Party that took America into Vietnam." No. 7 hardback: Mark Lane's "Plausible Denial," fingering your guy E. Howard Hunt, who gets cross-examined (he'd rashly sued another accuser for libel) in a scene right out of "Witness for the Prosecution." All these books absolutely sticking it to you—and certified as nonfiction.

Many books: Without getting into what's fiction or not—given *your* history, you're in no position to get huffy—let's grant that it's not just Warren Commission loyalists who distrust these books. Some conspiracy researchers find Lane's star witness unreliable; others, even after Kevin Costner's heartfelt act, can't forgive Big Jim for making them all look crazy.

But how many books can one intelligence agency discredit—even with our help here in the establishment media? You've also got Jim Marrs's "Crossfire," Stone's other main source, a compendium of conspiracy theories: more than 100,000 copies ordered since November. David Lifton's gruesome "Best Evidence," arguing that JFK's wounds were altered after his death: around 75,000. Mark North's "Act of Treason," claiming J. Edgar Hoover had advance knowledge of JFK's murder: around 50,000. "Unless there's some great revelation that solves the case," says Kent Carroll of Carroll & Graf, which published these last three, "I think the interest will continue." *Unless* ... Are you thinking what we're thinking? Just spill the beans. No hard-to-stage "accidents," no tricky disinformation schemes. And best of all, no consequences. You're the CIA, remember? Who's going to believe you?

DAVID GATES

in Tunisia to Sicilian parents, was using phony Guatemalan papers. Trafficante, the Florida boss who died in 1987, once told Cuban exile leader José Alemán that JFK wouldn't be re-elected because "He's going to be hit"—a threat known at the time to the FBI. Ragano last week recalled Marcello's "cat who ate the canary" look after the killing. "He said, 'Jimmy owes me and he owes me big'," Ragano told Newfield.

Some believe Ragano has the best of all reasons not to lie. Dan E. Moldea, who made the Teamsters-JFK-Ragano link in his 1978 book, "The Hoffa Wars," says the mob lawyer has put himself "at great personal risk." Indeed, in the underworld, honesty isn't always the best policy. After mobster Johnny Roselli hinted in 1976 that he knew who arranged JFK's murder, he was found off the Florida coast in a 55-gallon drum, hacked to pieces.

'Fallback position': Other conspiracy buffs, however, remain suspicious about Ragano's sudden urge to talk. With Hoffa and Trafficante dead and Marcello reportedly suffering from advanced Alzheimer's disease, there's nobody to refute his story. Ragano, who has his own book about the mob in the works, could use the publicity. For Stone, who believes the assassination was a high-level government coup d'état, the mob theory simply "continues the lie." Mark Lane, author of the current best-seller "Plausible Denial" (box), suspects Ragano's timing. Lane subscribes to what's known in the conspiracy biz as the fallback-position creed: if the Warren Commission report were fully discredited, those responsible for JFK's death would promulgate an alternative theory to protect themselves. "Organized crime is a perfect suspect. No one likes them," says Lane. But "organized crime gave orders to Jimmy Hoffa. Hoffa did not give orders to organized crime."

So who killed JFK? Last week LBJ adviser Joseph Califano trotted out Johnson's assertion that Fidel Castro ordered the killing in retaliation for repeated CIA plots against *him*. (Several Mafia experts believe Hoffa was the liaison between CIA Director Allen Dulles and the mob in an Eisenhower-era plot against Castro.) In Moscow, retired KGB agent Oleg Nechiporenko seemed ready to shed light on the assassination and boost Russia's economy in one move: he offered new information in exchange for hard currency. Even access to the files is unlikely to placate diehard theorists like Stone, who concedes the files probably won't prove a conspiracy. "There can't be any evidence," he admits. "Nothing was on paper." Says Stokes, "No matter what we release, we will never stop the speculation." John Kennedy's assassination may never be a closed book—and each new theory reopens the national wound.

ELOISE SALHOLZ *with* DANIEL GLICK *in Washington and* GREGORY CERIO *in New York*